April Nights at the Theatres

BEATRICE TERRY IN "A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM" ON SHAKESPEARES BIRTHDAY—CORT

MARGARET FARELEIGH IN EUGENE O'NEIL'S "ILE" ONE OF THE THREE PLAYS AT THE GREENWICH VILLAGE THEATRE

MARION BUCKLER IN "SEVENTEEN" ©UNDERWOOD UNDERWOOD.

LADY CHETWYND IN "HER COUNTRY" ©IRA L. HILLS STUDIO

MARION COAKLEY IN "AN AMERICAN ACE"

RENA PARKER PRIMA DONNA OF "FLO FLO"

LILLIAN LORRAINE IN THE ZIEGFED MIDNIGHT FROLIC"

By LAWRENCE REAMER.

THE English version of Henri Lavedan's "Service" seemed to interest its first audience at the Cohan Theatre last Monday. There was applause in abundance, but experienced observers of first night phenomena know that counts no more than the crackling of thorns under a pot. There was frequently the more eloquent tribute of interest which did not altogether flag during the extended discussions which the two acts contain. So it may be that the enterprise of Mrs. Fiske, whose appearance in the play was all but negligible, so little did she seem to be inspired by its leading role, will meet with springtime favor.

There were others to whom the performance seemed altogether uninspiring, whose faculties of comment felt more or less numb after witnessing the play. There has never been a work out of Paris in which the weight of thesis sat more heavily on the back of drama. Lavedan has written with the Q. E. D. in view. So he has cleared the decks of all superfluous adornment that might interest his listeners to the disadvantage of concentration in the single theme of the play.

Whether it were Alexander Dumas fils or Augier or the Sardou of "La Maison Neuve" and the Benoiton plays, the French dramatist loves his theme. Expounding has always been a part of the game he liked. But he never abandoned himself to it in the past with the freedom from all restraint that some of the later playwrights have shown. It may be true that the sexual love, which was always the basis of the plays of the first men with a theme, whatever its development may have been, has given place to more important consequences in the case of such writers as Eugene Brieux and Paul Hervieu. But after all it is the love motive on which the entire composition of these plays rests. "Damaged Goods," for instance, could not exist but for its feminine background. But Mr. Lavedan has in "Service" passed beyond any of his colleagues in rejecting the passions of the heart.

Not only is duty to country made the motive of the play but only maternal love is a possible inspiration to any of the characters. It is the sorrow of the woman who has lost two sons, the society of a daughter and the confidence of her husband that turns the thoughts of the woman and the son who also is against war to the belief that after all it is the highest duty of the citizen to defend the State against its enemies. The men like Brieux who turned the French drama from the pursuit of love for its own sake and its consequences are left behind Lavedan in uncompromising fidelity to the simpleness of theme.

And in this devotion to the belief that for the State the individual must give his service to war there is a singular indifference to all the methods of the playwright. Of conflict there is none, unless it reside in that eddy of the argument which makes the husband a spy, whereas his wife had thought him faithless in love. Clear narrative supplies the method of the author. His characters shoot ahead in their arguments with the undisturbed directness of a motor car on a smooth road. The mother hates militarism because of the grief it has caused her, and says so. The father believes that in the army resides the power of the nation, and says so. The Lieutenant in the army hates war because he has come under the influence of a younger generation of teachers, and says so. When they get together they all say the same things to one another.

Every character is static to the extent that with the exception of the last few minutes of the play each represents the same emotions at the beginning, the middle and the end. The father never changes in his devotion to the ideals of the warrior. Just as there is not the interest of story nor intrigue there is no real characterization. There are a positive and a negative, as in electricity, to exercise their effects on one another.

Then why did "Service" find its way out of the exquisitely Gallic phrases of Lavedan into the vernacular? Of course there must have been pleasure in listening to his language, and in a country which has known militarism for nearly half a century there was a large public ready to listen to the arguments on both sides of that theory. Plays that come to our theatre from a foreign source are most effective when they treat of the human being. He is the same with modifications the world over. There is always a residuum of reality to make him recognizable wherever he is. But there is less interest in the rules of national life as they throw their lights and shadows on this human nature unless it is the man and the woman and not the law which predominates in interest. Beyond talking about their woes there is no effort to make the men and women of "Service" as dominating as the theme.

The skill of Carter, who has also for purposes of further identification allowed himself to be called the Great, ought to awaken some of the old interest in the manifestations of the black art, for there was a time of undoubted favor for such demonstrations. The satanic Hermann was but the last of a long series of these skilful prestidigitateurs who could always count on a large following when they appeared in the city theatres for an annual divulgence of their talents. There was never any permanent home here for their abode, but they prospered in the past.

Vaudeville has in its avidity for all that may interest the unthinking absorbed most of these entertainers. It seems that their brief appearances on such programmes is enough to satisfy the present appetite of the public to be fooled. Carter, who is seeking to revive this interest in what may almost be called a lost art so far as the theatre in its more restricted sense is involved, is sufficiently skilful. He does the classic stunts of his calling with sufficient sleight of hand. To one who finds it difficult to slip a dime into the hospitable outstretched receptacle of a Fifth avenue bus conductor, what he accomplishes seems altogether phenomenal. Certainly he works the old magic with sufficient expertness to puzzle any audience that wants to be puzzled.

But the diversion could not help impressing the spectators one night last week as rather out of the spirit of the time. It seemed to correspond in but a slight degree to the demand for engrossing entertainment which is so characteristic of the public to-day. What can the mere skilfulness of such a performer accomplish in the face of a jazz band sliding out its heady syncopation while blackfaced mummers shout and the houris of the musical plays wriggle across the stage in fleshly cohorts? How can such quiet capacity hope to rival the power of the cinema's violently dangerous feats or its reproduction of the stirring events of actual life to-day?

It is the impatience of the public to-day which seems to put the art of the magician back into the category of pleasures that depend on a more naive willingness to be amused than our or any other metropolitan public possesses to-day. How can the careful and practiced efforts of any such expert hold a public that must be dazed or deafened before its artistic appreciations are aroused? Any manifestation of mere art, dramatic or otherwise, has long since been voted soporific or, what is in such a milieu still more deadly, old fashioned.

Yes, it is probably true that the art of the magician, his seance and all his little bag of tricks are old fashioned. Anything is old fashioned that for a minute causes a pause in the zip, crash, bang and boom that are the indispensable elements in a theatre to-day.

Yet the discerning cannot fail to pay his tribute of respect to an artist who learns his business so well as Carter has. Suppose all actors, for instance, had acquired such a technical thoroughness as the gentleman with the inexhaustible bottle, the finger rings and the fresh flowers locked in the jewel casket. Suppose—as the remotest of all analogies—that the average playwright had devoted a small part of his time to acquiring an equally complete knowledge of his business. If the singers in musical plays and the funny men in the same popular productions took the time to learn their lesson with the same fulness that the magicians must before they dare step on the stage, what an uplift for the artistic level of our stage.

So Carter in his exhibitions makes the same impression on the observer that the acrobat on a vaudeville programme invariably does. If any of his associates had devoted a part of the time to their preparation that the athlete must in order to save his neck, how much higher would the artistic heaven arise.

So the Hattons, to paraphrase a certain famous inscription, are to take their latest opus to the banks of the lake in the midst of the people of Michigan whom they love so well. "The Squab Farm" was not so strong as some of their other plays in the distinctive qualities of these dramatists. But its failure to remain long on view was probably due to the weakness that is characteristic of all their comedies. It is not yet possible to get along altogether without the skeleton. There must be fiction of some sort to carry through four acts. In the play which has just left the Bijou Theatre there was little or no story, and of course none of those means to play building which are discussed nowadays only by the oldsters deep in the fogs of Bardooddedem and other effete theories. The absence of story might not be so fatal to such works as "The Indestructible Wife" and "The Squab Farm" were there ever any evidence of expertness in concealing this dangerous lack. But without story and building there is danger ahead for the most original slang and exhibitions of the most modern types of character in our civilization.

"Lombardi Limited" in spite of its faults is substantial enough to stand. It is unfortunate that so much which is amusing and novel in American life should be sacrificed by the indifference of Mr. and Mrs. Hatton to the means of their art. If they will not or cannot learn the science of building their efforts in some approach to dramatic form, it would be in a way better for them to deck out some foreign skeleton in the really amusing episodes and characterization which is to be found in the most ephemeral of their dramas.

They have struck a new note in the American theatre. Their eyes are indeed open to the life about them even if the observation be somewhat strabismic. The characteristics which they have invented ought not to be lost merely from their lack of inventiveness in treating the fictional phase of their plays and their lack of proficiency in developing their stories scientifically.

So it would be better for the public if what they have to give the stage of originality in dialogue and characterization were applied to a foreign structure of enough strength to carry these embellishments. After all plot, even in farce, still counts a little. Dion Boucicault, who knew something of the business, said that a farce should be founded on granite. Long before him Freytag uttered the principle that the theme of a play must be important. These be authorities whether or not their dicta hold with the same force to-day. Nobody expects a structure of granite from the Hattons nor indeed desires it. Nor is it conceivable that their work should ever be very important. But all they write that is amusing, sophisticated and timely should not be lost because they are so contemptuous of the despised rules of the mandarins who are, if possible, even more disliked than their dicta.

NEW FOR MISS BEECHER.

Janet Beecher is doing something in "Yes or No" that she has never done before. She is playing a drab role. This actress, who has invariably played "dressy" parts, goes through the play wearing a gingham house dress set off only by a plain white collar. *Minnie*, the poor woman, requires little in the way of clothes for her tenement home, and the little she gets is one of the causes of her worrying.

It's a far cry from the dressy part of the *Empress Josephine* in "The Purple Road" to that of *Minnie* in "Yes or No," but Miss Beecher has bridged it successfully and now she is glad she took the plunge. Even well dressed roles palo on an actress after a while and she begins to yearn for a part that doesn't require many gowns. It is a distinct saving to an actress where she had to buy her own costumes—most of them do, unless in musical comedy—and Miss Beecher's gingham house dress that she uses in each of the three acts of "Yes or No" doesn't put much of a crimp in her bank roll.

"It's a distinct relief to me to play a part like my present one," said Miss Beecher, "because it's big and gives me an opportunity to show that I can act the role of a poor woman as well as rich and well bred ones. With the possible exception of when I played the role of a Swedish maid, I think that in all my stage career I have been presenting well to do women on the stage. People have rather got in the habit of expecting me to play such parts.

"*Minnie* in 'Yes or No' is just a plain, hard working woman struggling to make ends meet on her husband's meagre salary, doing her own housework and tending and caring for her own growing family. There are thousands of *Minnies*, aye, millions of them, I guess, and I am glad I have the chance to be one on the stage.

"It is a good acting role, too, a passive one at times, but with many opportunities. The struggles of a poor woman in making ends meet are always interesting, both to an audience and to the player. Never having acted a part of this kind before, I have had to work into it gradually. It is so different from the roles that I have played in the past that I have had to really study the character from many angles in my effort to give the best performance I am capable of giving.

"But any role that is a sympathetic one is always easiest to play, and certainly the part of *Minnie* obtains that sympathy right from the start. Unlike the wife on the uptown side of the stage, she is not pampered and lives in luxury. Life is one continual struggle for her in attending to her three little ones, keeping her house in order and even taking in boarders to help tide over the family's financial shortcomings. That the worthless boarder turns out to be a tempter in the insidious way of helping her with her household cares—the only one of her numerous household that does help—makes the audiences sympathize with her right from the start.

"It is a curious fact that one's sympathy invariably goes out to the overworked or hard working woman, particularly if she is a mother with little ones demanding her constant attention. And *Minnie's* three youngsters are very much in evidence throughout the play. They supply the child interest, always sure to draw sympathy, if there is not too much of the cloying

ALLA NAZIMOVA *and* NICA MAC *in* "HEDDA GABLER"

MARGALO GILLMORE *and* GORDON MORRIS *in* "APRIL"

JOBYNA HOWLAND *and* A. S. BYRON *in* "NANCY LEE"

MARION MOONEY *and* GRACE KEESHON *in* "SINBAD"

CHARLOTTE IVES *and* ALBERT BROWNE *in* "THE MAN WHO STAYED AT HOME"